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SUBJECT: FINLAND ON BELARUS

REF: STATE 30007

Classified By: PolChief Greg Thome for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) PolChief delivered subject demarche to Tuula Yrjola, Director of the Office for Eastern Europe and Central Asia April 1. The GoF has made strengthening democracy and urging reform in Belarus the rest of this region a focus of its OSCE Chairmanship-in-Office, so Yrjola appreciated the detailed background on developments in Minsk. The recent turn of events has been very discouraging for the EU, for many OSCE Member States (MS), and for the GoF. Finland had been actively supporting efforts to improve the EU-Belarus dialogue, and up until about the turn of the year there was a sense that real progress was being made, Yrjola said. The EU and the GOF were particularly encouraged by the release of several political prisoners and the agreement regarding the opening of an EU Commission office in Minsk -- a step that is especially crucial to EU MS like Finland that do not have Embassies on the ground. EU and GoF leaders remained guarded in their optimism, but there was a growing sense that the "reaching out" the EU had done was being reciprocated, at least via small steps.

¶2. (C) For these reasons, the GoF is particularly frustrated about many recent developments; the violent May 26 crackdown on demonstrators and the unwarranted diplomatic pressure against the US Embassy represent a turn in the wrong direction and are likely to undermine the small bits of progress and confidence building that had occurred in previous months, Yrjola said. She fully shared the US view that a unified trans-Atlantic approach on Belarus is crucial, and very close coordination will only become more vital as Belarus moves toward Parliamentary elections in the fall. While the GoF in no way condones the Lukashenka regime's egregious overreaction to the US Treasury Department action in November to freeze the assets of Belneftekhim, Yrjola did suggest that closer US-EU coordination on that issue might have helped the EU better prepare for Lukashenka's latest round of stunts.

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